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Next day's thoughts on the supplemental controversy

A surprise in the papers this morning: According to both the Times and the SF Chronicle, the leaders' bill DOES contain a ban on funding for an Iran attack, without Congressional authorization! True? I'd like to see a copy of the draft bill. Other stories indicate that some Democrats object to this ban, as hurting Israeli security. (Do we really need to jettison our Constitution to strengthen presidential threat-power in support of Israeli perceptions of their security?) If that doesn't stay in the draft as approved by the subcommittee, it should certainly be allowed to come to a floor vote as an amendment (as Webb is proposing in the Senate); in addition, if that fails, to being presented as stand-alone legislation.

Is it true, as I've now heard, that the leadership bill has no funding teeth in it? From the news accounts, I'd supposed, perhaps wishfully, that it cut off funding at the latest by August 1, 2008. If not, that's indeed very serious! Is the bill available yet to be seen?

The Lee bill does seem VERY preferable to the leaders' bill, for reasons I will mention briefly below and elaborate later. It seems VERY important to get a floor vote on it. However (especially if the Iran rider is in—despite the likelihood of veto or signing statement, it's a genuine marker by Congress, and none too soon) I don't see what's lost if those progressives who want to, vote for the leaders' bill after they have had their vote on the Lee bill, and thus having established a clear record of opposition to continuing the war vs. withdrawal starting now (as large a vote as possible, all stops pulled out).

To get a floor vote, do they all have to promise in advance to vote for the other? Isn't it enough for the leaders of the Progressive and Out-of-Iraq caucuses to say beforehand that their members can vote their consciences, after making a maximum effort on the floor vote on the Lee bill? That way Waters, Lee, Woolsey and others (up to fifteen altogether?) could still make an issue by voting no, without dooming the leaders' bill.

Maybe I'm missing something here. If so, I'd like to hear (this is not a challenge) what the advantage is in rejecting the leaders' bill after having had a vote on the Lee bill. I would like to know (I know everyone is super-busy, but maybe we could talk on the phone) what exactly happens if the leaders' bill fails to pass. Maybe this is elementary, but I just don't know. How bad is that, or not bad? What if it does pass but is vetoed; what is likely to follow? Maybe nobody knows very clearly what follows, but it does seem very relevant to judgments as to what to do about the leaders' bill. I do agree that if the leadership does NOT permit a vote on the Lee bill (or will not unless Lee, Waters et al promise to vote for theirs afterward) the progressives should all vote no.

The leaders' bill does seem to have the great merit of setting a "date certain" for total withdrawal--August 1, 2008--though it muddies that up with the cute "benchmarks" provisions: which make it look complicated and confusing, and which the president might as well certify right now, in sealed (or, who cares? unsealed) envelopes to be opened on July 1 and October 1 (if he bothers to answer at all).

BUT a) it provides for another full year of war, combat as the president decides, before a six-month withdrawal starting a year from now (instead of a nine-month withdrawal starting right now); that's BAD. (And if it doesn't cut off funding even after eighteen months, or ever, that's worse).

b) the president can plausibly complain about adding the domestic features to it, instead of making them a separate package. (After all, anyone can see that the Republicans don't really have to be "forced" to accept most of these by putting them in a "must-pass" bill; they're really there to get Democrats to support a continuation of the war, though not fully on the president's terms).

c) The two interim deadlines do still have the appearance of "micromanaging" the war--even though they're meaningless--unlike the Lee bill. Whatever precedents can be dredged up for Congressional "meddling," the president's point has some merit: "Either let me and the generals run this war, or you use your constitutional power (and accept the onus) for ending it."

The Lee bill steps up to the plate and does the latter, which is the right course. It's not the very last chance, over the next twenty months, but it's getting there. (I predict: EITHER this Congress bites this bullet while still under this unpopular president--and that's unlikely, and later opportunities won't be as good as this one, in funding terms, especially if there's an attack on Iran--or else the war will go on, and on, under a Democratic president, followed by a Republican president...)

Finally: Can anyone refer me to analyses or accounts of exit polling in November, 2006, in particular illuminating voting on Chafee and on the Blue Dogs? (Are they, now, representing what their own constituents wanted? Or did Rahm Emmanuel give the voters too many of such candidates to allow a majority against the war?)

Looks like a fruitful and illuminating argument coming up over the next two weeks!

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for Iran in a veto-proof bill. But I can also understand --and I accept--the focus of the peace groups and progressive Representatives who want the strongest possible rejection of a spending bill that simply continues the war, as the leaders are proposing.

I hear that these groups and Representatives will be "happy" if they can get 100 votes against the Supplemental. That doesn't come close to defeating it, but does stake out a solid oppositional position, showing a significant number of politicians who are willing publicly to accept the risks of responsibility for desiring to end, and ultimately for ending, the war. That would encourage others to join them, to build support for this position, even though it may be a while before a comparable opportunity to achieve an effective time-table occurs again. It would be an embarrassment to the leadership about divisions within Democrats (so what?) and, more usefully, an embarrassment to them and their followers for caving in to the Administration.

The situation is, to my mind, strikingly like the fall of 1969 when Democratic leaders, including recent Executive officials, refused to take real leadership in demanding and taking responsibility for an end to the war. At that time, they may not have understood that President Nixon had no inclination to take that responsibility or to end the war without achieving conditions that amounted to near victory. (Democrats today, I would say, don't have that excuse. By now they can hardly believe that President Bush wants to get out of this war and mostly of them may not have faced up to the fact that this successor will probably be no more willing to take that responsibility.)

Then, as now, the Democrats not only did not want responsibility for "losing" the war, but did not want responsibility for the events that would follow a U.S. withdrawal. These are likely to look bad in Iraq; that is also true if our troops stay, but then the responsibility, the Democrats hope, will be attributed solely to Bush. That may be true or it may not. A very reasonable view would be that the Democrats from this point on fully share responsibility with Bush for the continuation of war and for events in Iraq as they, probably, decline further into an abyss.

I personally have some misgivings that it is worth missing this opportunity in order to maximize votes against the Supplemental. (If the supplemental is going to pass in any case, as seems very likely, I would rather that it included a prohibition of funding for an attack on Iran than that it didn't. The best result from my point of view would be for Pelosi and Murtha to include this in the bill, perhaps in hopes that it would reduce Democratic votes against the bill, but for it to fail to have this effect; so that there was a maximum number of Democratic votes against the bill, say a hundred or even more, but that the bill which passed anyway did rule out funding for Iran. Ah well...it's out of my hands.) But I can appreciate the arguments on the other side, for clarity of an oppositional message. This is, after all, the first test of whether some or many Democrats are really willing do all that they can to end this war and to show willingness to do this even against the wishes of their leadership, who seem to be putting undue weight on a show of (non-existent) party unity.

This last point seems to apply also to MoveOn, whose representatives in Washington have said in a meeting “we’ve got to come up with something the leaders will accept.” Why? That suggests very unhappily that they have adopted a role of providing grassroots support to leadership positions rather than being a real voice and influence for opinions of their own grassroots. As of now, that may actually take MoveOn out of the ranks of effective anti-war forces.

Some Democrats—possibly including some or most of the leaders—almost surely want the war simply to continue under Bush through 2008 so that they will reap the benefits in November 2008 of voter dissatisfaction with war, gaining the White House and a larger majority in Congress. They want to express complaints about the way the war is being handled, in particular the surge escalation, but without doing anything that gives them unmistakable responsibility for its conduct or for ending it.

Practically and constitutionally, they really can’t effect tactics much on the surge in particular, whereas they could in fact stop the war by setting a short and strict timetable on funding. Provisions about benchmarks and restrictions on troop deployment which the President can waive serve only to purport to distinguish the Democrats’ policy from that of the President and to embarrass the president when he does waive the restrictions and when the benchmarks are not met. This is what the current maneuvering of the Democratic leaders and most of their followers is all about: embarrassing their opposition in 2008. This is just politics as usual, neither better nor worse than is usually to be expected. But at this moment, to limit themselves to these tactics is to accept the deaths of many Americans and perhaps ten times as many Iraqis without having done everything possible—even at personal political risk, and without certainty of success—to save those lives.

Murtha and Pelosi have even loaded up their draft of the Supplemental with goodies like funds for Veterans’ health, Walter Reed Hospital, and Katrina victims, precisely to make it hard for Democrats to vote against the bill. These are measures that could easily pass in stand-alone legislation and would never be vetoed. The only purpose for including them in this supplemental is to maximize Democratic votes for a bill that does not satisfy, in some cases, their own consciences and inclinations and certainly does not represent those voters who want an end to the war.

Granted—as Appropriations Chairman Obey was just caught on video saying angrily to a constituent who he categorized among “idiot liberals”—it is probably true that “the votes aren’t there” to achieve an immediate timetable on withdrawal. But there is great merit in demonstrating the largest possible congressional opposition to continuation of the war, in this first test of the Democratic-run Congress. If that embarrasses the Democratic leadership, too bad, and so much the worse for them.